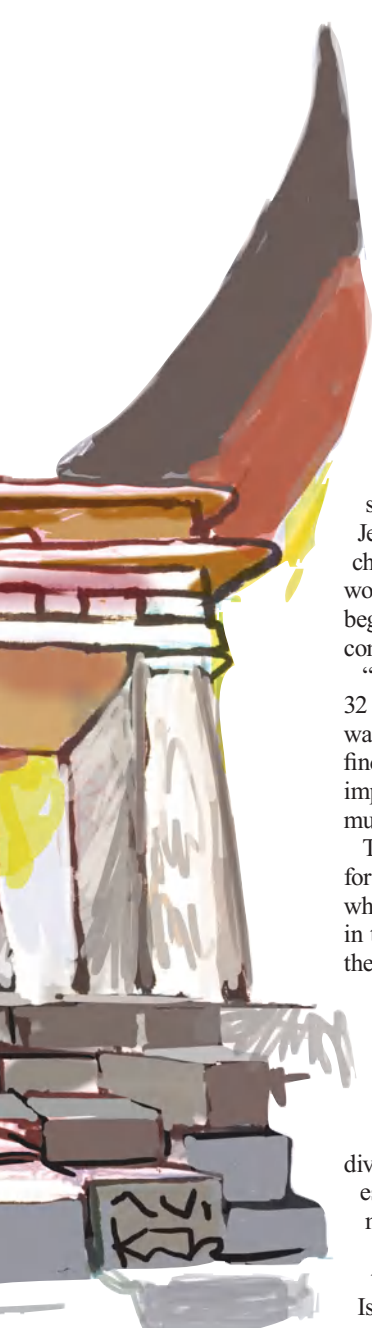




AVI KATZ

Israelis take Berlin

The influx of Israelis to the German capital has grown sharply in the past couple of years **By Michal Levertov Berlin**



IT'S NOON, and across the street from the hip café-bar at the Mitte, Berlin's central quarter, a man strides leisurely on the sidewalk, wearing what seem to be pajamas. Jerusalem-born Amichai Grosz, the head of the viola section of Berlin's famed Philharmonic Orchestra, explains that it is precisely this type of relaxed, easygoing lifestyle that makes Berlin such a magnet not only for him but for many other Israelis.

When Grosz moved in 2010 to Berlin and auditioned for the Philharmonic, he was already a successful musician – a member and founder of The Jerusalem Quartet, one of Israel's most esteemed chamber groups. The decision to part ways with the world-renowned string quartet for the sake of a new beginning, he admits to *The Jerusalem Report*, did not come easy.

"I spent half of my life with the quartet," says the 32 year-old musician. "It felt like leaving a family. It was also a risky step. I had no guarantee that I would find work here," he says. "But involvement was more important to me than anything else. In Israel we mix music with life and life with music; I needed fresh air."

There is, it seems, a high demand among Israelis for such "fresh air." The influx of Israelis into Berlin, which began in the early 2000s, has sharply intensified in the last couple of years. At the beginning of 2012, the Israeli Embassy estimated the number of Israelis residing in the city as somewhere between 10,000 to 15,000. The next year, the estimated figures jumped to 14,000 to 20,000.

The sharp growth has generated some interesting developments within this young community, including the opening of an Israeli division in Berlin's Jewish Community and the establishing of an independent, printed Hebrew magazine.

And, as Grosz implies, it also indicates that there are many more layers to the phenomenon of Israelis-in-Berlin than just the simplistic, prevalent

portrayal in Israeli media of Berlin as an escapist clubbing beehive, a Tel-Aviv-on-the-River-Spree. A comparison which, while we're at it, Grosz begs to differ with, "Berlin's mentality, with its fringe-like atmosphere and unpretentious aftertaste, reminds me much more of Jerusalem than of Tel Aviv," he asserts.

It was, therefore, Berlin's interlaced musical and social merits that made him choose this city as his new base. "Berlin's borders and limits are not yet set or defined," he says. "It is a city that, though perhaps too quickly, still innovates itself. This, alongside the relatively low cost of living, is an attraction for people from all over the world. It is not a beautiful city, and its weather is by no means attractive, but there is a certain power to this town. It has over 10 excellent orchestras, three opera houses, amazing theaters, dance groups, you name it. You don't find that in London or Paris. And despite its present flair of trendiness, Berlin is still a place that manages to keep it real."

Yet Berlin's past, too, has a major role in the Israeli presence – and not merely because European – and particularly German – passports, which many Israelis hold due to their families' origins, are making work, study and sometimes even enjoying welfare benefits there easier. The space the Holocaust holds in Israel's discourse and perceptions is a gateway that even the most escapist Israeli cannot (and usually would not want to) evade when arriving in the city that was the pivot of Nazi Germany.

"The desire to look into the volcano's mouth," sociologist Irit Dekel of Berlin's Humboldt University tells *The Report*, "is an initial motivation to come here. When Israelis in Berlin are asked what drew them to the city, some talk about that historical burden together with how cool everyone says this city is. This fascination is explored through the freedom to pursue a lifestyle that they could not have in Israel for cultural as well as for economic reasons.

"After they have resided here for some time, or as short-term visitors, the main factor they raise as a reason to live here is some sense of a peaceful



existence which this city enables. Israelis talk about the possibility to live as individuals without having to report on when they will finally commit to the Israeli codes of conduct, namely have a family, a steady job and own property. In other words, Berlin is attractive as the negative of the dark history it symbolizes – and, as such, it is very liberating. Add to this, too, the important fact that it is affordable and somewhat cosmopolitan, and that now there is a vibrant Israeli community with radio, meetings, magazines and newsletters, a nascent youth movement and more, which give a sense of belonging to the Jewish Berlin.”

THIS, DR. DEKEL points out, is a perception of migrant identity much different from that prevalent, for instance, in Israeli immigration to New York, “where research in the 1980s found a deep yearning for Israel’s collectivity and a strong nostalgia for the life in Israel.

“Here,” she continues, “we have a crowd of artists, students and intellectuals. Many have come here on a European passport. They go back and forth to Israel, are active locally, and have no issues with their European passport as a gate opener, neither with their choice to live in Germany. In this choice, they also change the ways Germans relate to Israelis and Jews. No longer haunted by victimhood, they often shake German narratives about Jews.”

Dekel is an Israeli researcher of collective memory whose book, the first ethnography of Berlin’s Holocaust Memorial, will be published this summer. Having resided for the past decade in Berlin, Israel and in the US, she says that her personal experience reflects similar conclusions. “Even sing-along events here in Berlin,” she says, referring to Israelis’ ultimate representation of nostalgic togetherness, “leave much space for individualism.

But, she argues, while Israel’s collective grip pushes individuals to Berlin, cracks within that very collectiveness are actually contributing to a legitimization of the Berlin-bound immigration. “Israel’s collective grip is loosening,” she says, “and narratives such as those, which perceive Israel as the safest terrain on earth for Jews, and Germany as the worst possible place for them, are also weakening.”

Another explanation for the sharp rise in Israeli migration to Berlin, she adds, is a consumer view adopted in Israel in recent years in regard to life in Germany. “I came across countless statuses and photos on Facebook in which Israeli visitors revere the



COURTESY

GERO HECKER



low price of food and beer here. People visit and can imagine how it would be for them to live here, and that generates a mindset that accepts that life in Berlin can be better and easier than life in Israel; and it produces an atmosphere, which is new to Israel, where the notion of seeking a better life in Germany can be held as legitimate.”

The desire to look into the volcano's mouth is an initial motivation to come here

Last year, German novelist Markus Flohr, 32, published a short autobiographical story about a fling he had with a young Israeli woman in Tel Aviv. The girl, he writes, was criticized by her brother for associating with a guy whose grandparents, as the brother put it, murdered their grandparents. “But our family,” replied the young woman, “is from Iran.”

“This story,” says Flohr, whose debut 2011 novel, “Where Saturday Is Always Sunday,” based on a year he spent as a journalist in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, “is about my own process of comprehending how extensively the Holocaust is interlaced in Israeli daily life, in a manner that is similar only to Germany’s.” That the third generation has been transferring, he says, the focal point of coping with the Holocaust from the public level, which was the main domain where the

second generation confronted the issue, onto the more personal level, is also common for Israelis and Germans alike.

“In my family, I was the first generation to ask what the grandparents did during the war. My mother taught me a lot about the Holocaust, but, on the other hand, did not even know that my grandfather was a member of the Nazi party. I think that she never asked because she was afraid that knowing would hurt their relationship,” he says. The query into “what it means for our interpersonal and intercultural relations,” he suggests, is among the reasons for the growing Israeli interest in Berlin.

Flohr believes there is also an urge to personally defy the past. “My impression is that one of the reasons that Israelis are drawn to Berlin is the need to inquire how their lives may have been had the Holocaust not happened,” he says. “It is not about erasing history, but rather about changing it.”

VIOLIST YUVAL HED, 26, confirms that in his case, Flohr’s assumption is exact. Hed, a graduate of Jerusalem’s Music Academy, moved to Berlin to study at UDK, Berlin’s University of the Arts. “I played,” he explains, “with the West-East Divan Orchestra” (the prestigious Jewish-Arab musical project headed by conductor Daniel Barenboim), where half of the musicians have already been studying in Berlin, and the decision to proceed to such studies was for me a natural. My parents were very supportive. My father, a Holocaust survivor, was born in Berlin, in Linienstrasse, and he told me that had it not been for the war, he would have probably, as



COURTESY

(Far left) The March-April issue of Spitz, the magazine for 'Israelis @ Berlin'; (center) German novelist Markus Flohr spent a year in Israel; (right) Jerusalem-born Amichai Grosz, 'I needed fresh air'

a young man, been studying there himself.”

The German media, Flohr notes, shows a special interest too in Berlin’s new Israeli population. “This is a sensitive subject,” he says. “A discourse about the regeneration of the Jewish presence in Berlin started already five to ten years ago, and it perceives the Israeli immigration as a part of this regeneration. This discourse’s positive side is that it acknowledges the Jewish historical contribution to Germany and longs for its regeneration. The negative side is that such discourse can yield a problematic dynamic of a German narrative that is merely looking for being forgiven. A narrative, which implies – and I am being sarcastic here – ‘Well, they are back in Berlin. Therefore no harm was done.’”

Among the various results of the new demographic curve is Berlin’s Jewish Community’s Israeli Department, which opened this February. The establishment of the department was in fact initiated by Israelis. But the notion of integrating the forming Israeli community into the established Jewish community, which consists of around 10,000 members, many of them of Russian origin, was a welcome idea, says Ilan Kiesling, the spokesperson for Berlin’s Jewish Community. “It is a group that has much potential,” he says.

Kiesling acknowledges the sensitivity of an initiative that could be seen as a validation for Israeli immigration to Germany. “Our goal is not to convince Israelis to stay in Germany,” he stresses, “but to reach out to those who have already decided to live here.”

“When I arrived here three and a half

years ago, I had to do everything the hard way,” Tal Alon, founder and editor of Spitz, the first Hebrew magazine printed in Berlin since World War II, tells The Report. “Today, new arrivals can easily find information in Hebrew, on the Internet, on how to apply for an artist visa or on how to apply for a job. There is already a Hebrew library functioning

It is affordable and somewhat cosmopolitan and now there is a vibrant Israeli community

in Berlin, Israeli jazz nights, afternoon activities for children, a lively Facebook group that brings up everything, from posts about rental apartments to debates on how to mark Israeli holidays, or even soul-searching discussions on racist conduct among Israelis. These all are signs of a community in the making.”

ALON, 37, moved to Berlin from Tel Aviv with her husband, artist Olaf Kuhnemann, and their two sons, aged six and nine. “I would not have been able to take such a step had I not known that we can maintain the tight relations with my family in Israel,” she says. “The kids Skype with their grandparents and with their cousins on a regular basis, and when we visit Israel there is no awkward sense of being detached or a stranger.

“One of Berlin’s main attractions is the

range of opportunities it offers to people of creative professions who are not necessarily interested in making a fortune, but rather in living in a metropolis with a sane cost of living, which enables quality of life and cultural activities. But technological advances, which make it easier to maintain family and work relations with Israel, alongside the relatively cheap Berlin-Tel Aviv flights, which make traveling back and forth smoother, may have also contributed to the growth of an Israeli presence in the city,” she notes.

She also points out the popularity of Berlin’s real-estate market among Israeli investors – even those who have no intentions of moving to Germany. This has yielded a growing population of Israeli business entrepreneurs.

During her first year in Berlin, Alon continued writing for Israeli media, as well as for Israel-based start-ups. “Physically, I was here, in Berlin,” she recalls, “yet my entire world was still in Israel. I lived in a bubble. Last year, with the increase in the Israeli expat population and with my own emergence out of that initial bubble-like seclusion, I felt the time was ripe to start a magazine in Hebrew.”

Aspiring to serve as a meeting point between the two worlds without sinking into nostalgia, Spitz tackles the political, cultural and even linguistic impediments, which await the magazine’s readership in its adopted hometown. The March-April issue, for instance, introduced Berlin’s political and media arenas in terms and comparisons familiar to almost every Israeli – such as which local newspaper Haaretz readers are bound to feel most at home with. The March issue was also Spitz’s first as an independent publication. Its previous issues were published under the auspices of local Chabad.

The cover of the latest issue shows an Israeli man sitting in front of a plate of humus on a table in a typical Berlin apartment. The man is holding a baby while casually reading the local Berliner Zeitung. This image, Alon asserts, is a visualization of her vision for Spitz – an attentive publication that offers its readers tools to feel at home both with their Israeli identity and with their new Berlin-based existence. ■